

Powell: Colombia Abides by Rights Laws

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WASHINGTON (AP) - Secretary of State Colin Powell has certified to Congress that the Colombian government and armed forces are meeting standards set by Congress for protecting human rights and severing ties with rightist paramilitary groups, the State Department said Tuesday.

Powell's action frees \$31.6 million in assistance for Colombia's security forces, or 12.5 percent of the \$252 million assistance program for the current fiscal year.

The certification drew sharp criticism from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which contended that Colombia fell short of the congressional standards.

In a statement, the State Department spokesman Philip Reeker noted that as conditions for U.S. assistance, Congress required that Colombia suspend military officers alleged to have committed rights violations or to have assisted paramilitary groups, among other demands.

"The secretary's determination is based on a thorough, careful evaluation of the conditions in U.S. law and the relevant actions and policies of the government of Colombia and the Colombian armed forces," he said.

Reeker said that despite notable progress, the State Department recognizes that more needs to be done to improve the human rights performance of the armed forces, including ending military-paramilitary collaboration.

The State Department provided little specific information to reinforce Powell's report that Colombia deserved certification.

A senior official cited the case of Gen. Gabriel Ramon Diaz, who was dismissed by President Alvaro Uribe without explanation on June 6.

The official, asking not to be identified, also alluded to "several dozen people" with links to Colombia's security forces who have been suspended, dismissed or are facing trial.

He also cited the case of a retired colonel who was sentenced to 40 years for facilitating a massacre in 1997.

William Schulz, executive director of Amnesty International USA, called the certification shameful.

"Last year, more than 4,000 civilians were killed for political reasons, at least 500 were 'disappeared' and more than 400,000 were displaced from their homes," Schulz said.

He said that while the armed forces are responsible for much of the violence, "one cannot ignore the involvement of paramilitary forces that often work in collusion with the Colombian military, and thereby become the unintended beneficiaries of our funds."

Human Rights Watch complained about continuing ties between the military and Colombian paramilitary units that are on the State Department list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

The rights group acknowledged that Colombia's armed forces were arresting more low-level paramilitaries than in years past.

"However, in vast regions of the country, the military-paramilitary alliance remains as strong as ever," said Jose Miguel Vivanco, Executive Director of the Americas Division of Human Rights Watch.

Rep. Jan **Schakowsky**, D-Ill., accused the administration of a "blatant disregard for the welfare of the Colombian people" by working with a military establishment that has been implicated in "gross atrocities."